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AUTHOR Ngandu, Kathleen M.; O'Rourke, Bill
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ABSTRACT

To gather information about reading as it relates to older adults, 267 people, ranging in age from 60 to 93 years, were asked to complete questionnaires. Specific information elicited concerned reading habits, reading materials, time spent in reading daily, time spent watching television, reading interests, preferred television shows, and reading motivations. Results showed the following: (1) the elderly subjects enjoyed reading; (2) they most frequently read newspapers and magazines; (3) the best sources of materials seemed to be subscriptions, churches, friends, and senior centers; (4) the subjects averaged 2.4 hours of daily reading and 2.4 hours of television viewing; (5) the top reading interests were religion and news; (6) most subjects identified news/public affairs shows as their favorite television fare; and (7) the main motivations for reading were enjoyment and information. (FL)

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READING ATTITUDES, HABITS, INTERESTS, AND MOTIVATIONS OF THE ELDERLY

College Reading Association Conference, 1979

Kathleen M. Ngandu

Hood College

and

Bill O'Rourke

Colorado Springs Public Schools

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READING ATTITUDES, HABITS, INTERESTS, AND MOTIVATIONS OF THE ELDERLY

Research in reading typically focuses on children, young and middle-aged adults. We have prolific information concerning these populations. In contrast, very little attention is paid to the older-aged groups. A recent computer research of Dissertation Abstracts International as well as ERIC sources located less than a dozen data based studies focusing on the elderlys' reading attitudes, habits, interests, and/or motivations.

De Santi's (1976) research identifies some of the reading strategies, interests, and habits of four older adults. Wolf (1975) specifically examined leisure-time reading behaviors. Mitzer's (1975) research examined reading differences between active and educationally non-active older persons. And an earlier study by Hoar (1960) looked at general reading behaviors of the aged.

Romani (1973) and Lovelace (1977) briefly discussed reading interests of the elderly. Kingston (1977) outlined preferred reading topics of middle and upper-income older adults as well as their reading habits. Finally, a more comprehensive study by Moshey (1972) included types of reading materials a group of 50 retired adults generally selected.

Recognizing the need for more information about reading as related to older Americans, The University of Nebraska Center on Aging funded the seminal study discussed in this report. The specific purpose of this research was to answer the following questions as they relate to elderly individuals:

1. What are their attitudes about reading?
2. What types of reading materials are most popular?
3. What are their most frequent sources of reading materials?
4. How much time is spent in daily reading, as compared with television viewing?
5. What are their preferred reading interests?
6. What are their preferred television programs and are these programs similar to preferred reading interests?
7. What motivates individuals to read (or not read)?

METHOD

This case study dealt with persons attending the Senior Diners program in a medium-sized Nebraska city. In order to encourage social contact, the program serves a nutritious meal to older persons in local community centers. These persons live in independent, rather than retirement home situations. Most persons are bussed in Senior Diner vans, although some drive cars or walk to the centers.

The researchers and their assistants visited all nine Senior Diner sites where they requested volunteers to complete a 10 item, one-page questionnaire. Two hundred sixty-seven persons, about 80% of the total group, completed the form. The respondents' ages ranged from 60-93 years, averaging 71 years. Sixty-seven percent were female and thirty-three percent were males.

Persons answered the questionnaire in small groups or individually with a research assistant if they needed help to write their answers or seemed to desire extra personal attention. Most of the subjects took about ten minutes to answer the questions. Generally the respondents were cooperative and several persons talked extensively about information they had written on their forms.

The questionnaire included a total of eight closed and open-ended questions that focused on the original research questions. Answers were later tallied and are summarized in the following section.

Results and Discussion

Attitudes

A positive attitude about reading was quite evident. Given five attitude choices, "love reading" was selected by 32% of the group, "like reading" was chosen by 55%, "no feelings" was indicated by 10%, only three percent said they "disliked reading," and no one checked "hate reading."

Elderly persons enjoy reading and this feeling should be enhanced whenever possible, as reading activities are productive ways to fill leisure-time hours.

Popular Reading Materials

Elderly adults most frequently read newspapers (76% of all subjects indicated they often read this material) and magazines (63%). To a lesser extent they read books (38%) and pamphlets (20%). The Bible was specifically identified as the main reading material by 19% of the group and was therefore not included in the general category of books. Other items were mentioned by only one percent or less of the group.

Perhaps newspapers and magazines are generally preferred due to their short, timely articles as well the ease of obtaining them through subscription. Currently there are many special interest publications for a variety of special interest groups, such as working women, sports fans, and singles, but there are very few magazines specifically designed for the elderly. This gap must be filled.

Religion plays a very important part in these persons' lives. The fact that nearly one-fifth of all persons specifically named the Bible as a popular reading material is strong support for this statement.

Sources of Reading Materials

The major reading sources for the Senior Diners were subscriptions (59% of all persons said they subscribed to at least one publication), churches (29%), friends (27%) and senior centers (23%). Libraries (19%), family (14%) and bookstores (7%) were rated lower, while bookmobiles (2%) and newsstands (1%) were checked by a very few people. Other materials such as personal letters and advertisements provided nine percent of the sources.

The best sources of materials seems to be those that come via home delivery, churches, or senior centers. Since these materials are most readily available, they are logical avenues. It seems that there could be an increased use of public libraries; however, transportation would have to be arranged in many cases.

Time Spent Reading and Viewing TV

The total group averaged 2.4 hours of daily reading with a range from "no time" to six hours. Persons were also asked to note the amount of time they spent watching television. Interestingly, the average time spent viewing TV was also 2.4 hours for the total group, but the range extended from "no time" to nine hours.

Reading is an important daily activity for many older persons. Assuming most of them sleep and nap about nine to ten hours per day, they are averaging 18% of their waking hours in reading activities. Compared to adults in general they read slightly less than the average 2.7 hours of daily job-related

and free-time reading (Mikulecky, 1978). It must also be emphasized that there are several elderly who read much less than this, possibly because of difficulties with eyesight.

Although several persons complained about the poor quality of television programs, this medium still competes for their attention. According to the results of a two-year project at the Annenberg School of Commerce, University of Pennsylvania, "Older people are... badly shortchanged in television drama"--they are portrayed very negatively (Gerbner, as cited in Kernan, 1979). Perhaps the immediate accessibility of the TV, compared with the greater difficulty in obtaining reading materials, influences some older Americans' decisions to watch television.

Preferred Reading Interests

When asked to identify their favorite reading interests in an open-ended questions, the Senior Diners gave a priority to religion (43% of all persons supplied this topic) and news (18%). The topic of history was listed by five percent of the group, while the sports topic was provided by four percent. Biography and travel were mentioned by three percent of the cases, while politics, crafts, medicine and home-making topics were selected by two percent in each case. Finally, one percent or less mentioned the topics of animals/nature/plants, comics, finance, poetry, science, education, "good old days," and psychology as their preferred reading topics.

There is a great diversity among preferred reading topics, but religion and the Bible were continually emphasized by many persons. It therefore seems logical that church groups promote reading clubs, book sharing sessions, or book lending libraries to encourage reading pursuits of the elderly.

Preferred Television Programs

Each individual was asked to identify his/her five favorite TV programs. A content analysis of the complete listing of all participants' responses led to a grouping of similar program types in several categories. Fifty-eight percent of all elderly persons included a news/public affairs title in their list of favorites. Other popular program types included comedies (37%) and game shows (28%). Talk shows were rated lower (17%) as were detective programs (17%), soap operas (15%) and dramas (11%). The lowest ratings were given to sports (9%), animal/nature (9%), westerns (8%), educational programs (5%), religion (7%), musicals (4%), adventure (3%), variety (2%), travel (1%), children's shows (1%) and others (1%).

Certainly these favorites were influenced by the networks' emphasis on various types of programs. For example, this year there are many comedies, and these older adults rated this category highly. Likewise, there are fewer religious programs, most of which are televised Sunday morning, when many of these persons are probably in church. So, it is not surprising that they rated religion lower. The high rating of news, however, does not parallel network time allocations. This indicates that elderly people are purposely choosing to watch this type of program rather than always just passively viewing.

News was highly rated as a TV favorite, as well as a reading favorite. Furthermore, the following subsection emphasizes this interest in news.

Motivation for Reading (or Not Reading)

These persons said they read mainly because they enjoy it (23% of all subjects stated this reason) and wanted to be informed or education (23%). Several others read mainly to pass the time (20%). Two percent read only for religious reasons, while one percent or less read because they were lonesome,

to relax, to check for coupons, or because they couldn't watch television.

Twenty-six percent of the Senior Diners stated that there were times when they chose not to read because of eye difficulties. Two percent felt they did not have time to read, lacked interest, or wanted to do other things. One percent or less wrote that they did not care to read, were too sleepy, had ill health, or lacked reading abilities.

Difficulties of old age, mainly eyesight, have a negative influence on persons' reading habits. In cases where individuals can no longer read well, large type or recorded materials may help. Talking books are provided free of charge by organizations such as The Jewish Guild for the Blind (Cassette Library, The Jewish Guild for the Blind, 15 W. 65th Street, New York, N.Y. 10023). Older persons could also be read to by others. For example, in this particular city, a local scout troup read to individuals in a nursing home. This same type of service is needed by those in independent-living situations.

It may also be the case that elderly persons do not have sufficient home lighting to read well, as a recent medical study (Davis) concluded. Fifty percent of the older persons attending a sight disability clinic could read much better in the clinic than they could at home. Upon closer investigation it was found that their home lighting was typically only ten percent of that at the clinic. The researchers suggested that simply adding a 60 watt bulb and a $6 lamp would greatly improve the elderly's vision at home.

Conclusions

The older American represents a growing minority whose concerns must be recognized, especially by community organizations, recreational planners, and other groups that service them. Yes, financial outlays, cooperative

planning, and a genuine interest will be needed to support some of the previously made suggestions; however, reading activities for elderly persons must be encouraged. We believe that individuals who read are persons who think, remain mentally active, and generally feel satisfied with this activity. These benefits will certainly directly or indirectly benefit our total society.

The efforts of this initial seminal study need to be expanded to larger as well as more diverse populations. For example, rural community elderly, or those living in retirement homes could be examined. Also, what common factors have influenced their reading? If the backgrounds of avid life-long readers could be studied, a "reading autobiography" might help isolate particular variables which seem consistent among these older persons.

As we add information about elderly Americans reading attitudes, habits, interests, and motivation to that which we already have about children and adults, we should be able to understand more completely the developmental reading process. Thus, the span from the very young to the very old will be completed.

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